

JAMES JOHN GARTH WILKINSON 1812–1899: AUTHOR, PHYSICIAN, SWEDENBORGIAN

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Almost entirely unknown today, except perhaps to scholars of the James family, James John Garth Wilkinson being a close friend of Henry James senior, he was in his own day a well-known writer on a variety of medical, social and religious topics. In the chapter on 'Literature' in his *English Traits*, published in 1856, Ralph Waldo Emerson, after devoting a paragraph each to Macaulay, Coleridge and Carlyle, says this about the subject of this paper:

Wilkinson, the editor of Swedenborg, the annotator of Fourier, and the champion of Hahnemann, has brought to metaphysics and to physiology a native vigour, with a catholic perception of relations, equal to the highest attempts, and a rhetoric like the armoury of the invincible knights of old. There is in the action of his mind a long Atlantic roll not known except in deepest waters, and only lacking what ought to accompany such powers, a manifest centrality. If his mind does not rest in immovable biases, perhaps the orbit is larger, and the return is not yet: but a master should inspire confidence that he will adhere to his convictions, and give his present studies always the same high place.¹

These words are high praise indeed for a writer who is almost unknown today. Wilkinson was born on 3 June 1812 in Acton Street off Gray's Inn Lane on the borders of Bloomsbury. He was an exact contemporary of Charles Dickens and Robert Browning, both of whom he knew, but well outlived both of them, dying at the age of eighty-seven on 18 October 1899, a few weeks after the publication of his last book. His father, James John Wilkinson, was a barrister who wrote treatises on commercial and shipping law and became the Judge of the Court of the County Palatine of Durham. The Wilkinsons were natives of Durham city. James John senior had married Harriet Robinson whose family came from Sunderland. Garth (as I shall call him) was the eldest of their eight children. Educated at schools in Mill Hill and at Totteridge, at the age of sixteen he was apprenticed by his father to the senior surgeon at the Royal Infirmary in Newcastle upon Tyne. Garth had wanted to follow his father into the law, but James Wilkinson senior had other ideas.

At the Newcastle Infirmary Garth acted as a 'dresser' for his master and also helped with the compounding of drugs and the bleeding of patients. Surgery before the days of anaesthetics and antiseptics was a crude and rather horrible process. Garth hated it. In 1832 he returned to London and spent two years 'walking' the wards of Guy's Hospital. In 1834 he qualified as a Member of the Royal College of Surgeons and in the same year became a Licentiate of the Society of Apothecaries. By November 1835, with financial help from his family, he had set himself up as an independent medical practitioner at 13 Store Street, Bedford Square. He moved from Bloomsbury in 1847, first to 25 Church Row in Hampstead and then to 4 Finchley Road, St. John's Wood, but maintained his Bloomsbury links through his connection with the Swedenborg Society which first acquired a permanent base at no. 36 (later no.1) Bloomsbury Street in 1855. The position of a general practitioner in those days was as much that of a pharmacist as of a physician. While he would be able to charge a fee for attending patients, the majority of his income was derived from dispensing his

own prescriptions and selling drugs over the counter of his 'front shop'. The back parlour often served as both consulting room and living room. Garth told Henry James many years later that he 'never believed in the good or truth of promiscuous drugging' and his early practice did not prosper, leaving him sufficient time to pursue his scholarly interests, and he was able to spend many hours in the British Museum reading Room.

By 1835 those scholarly interests included the study of the works of the eighteenth-century Swedish scientist, philosopher, theologian and mystic, Emanuel Swedenborg. Garth's maternal uncle, George Blakiston Robinson, a coal factor from County Durham who had once been secretary to the Duke of Northumberland, was a devoted Swedenborgian. He was Secretary of the London Printing Society (now known as the Swedenborg Society) from 1816 to 1822 and, from 1834 when they were first appointed, one of the trustees of the Society's property. Garth was a frequent visitor to his uncle's house at Woodford in Essex and it was there that he met and fell in love with the family governess, Emma Marsh who came from Diss in Norfolk. They became engaged very shortly after Garth had established his medical practice in Store Street and they married in St George's Church, Bloomsbury on 4th January 1840. The marriage was a long and very happy one (they had three daughters and a son), although Emma predeceased her husband by some years.

It was Emma who persuaded her husband to take up the practice of homoeopathy which, as Garth later confessed to his father, 'for the first time caused me really to love my noble Profession' and brought him financial success with his income by 1852 getting on for £2,000 a year (about £130,000 in today's money).ⁱⁱ Garth wrote movingly about an experience early in his marriage when their eldest child, still a baby, had a sudden attack of bronchitis during the night. Both parents sat at the end of her bed. Garth ordered ipecacuanha wine as an emetic and went down to the surgery to fetch it. The medicine stood there and husband and wife argued about who was to administer it. Garth told his wife that the ordering of medicine was the doctor's job and that it was the task of the mother or the nurse to give it. Emma responded that he was not only the doctor, but father and nurse, and that it was for him to give the medicine to the child. She was glad that her husband had seen at home what burdens were laid upon parents and nurses when the doctor had departed. She told him that for long she had felt a repugnance to all his practice and that this occasion, ie their baby's illness, had been sent partly to oblige him to look into that new thing called homoeopathy.

The upshot of the particular case was, that my wife gave a piece of ipecacuanha, such as would pass through the eye of a needle, to the child; and a good homoeopathic remedy it was; after which, the oppression of the breathing passed away.ⁱⁱⁱ

Wilkinson was elected as a member of the committee of the London Printing Society in 1839 and in that year appeared his first translation from a Latin text by Swedenborg, of a book called *The Last Judgment* originally published in 1758, but the first book for which Wilkinson became known was a letter-press edition of Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, which was also published in 1839 by Pickering & Newbery, the latter being the Printing Society's own printer and bookseller. On joining the Printing Society Wilkinson became acquainted with one of its founder members, Charles Augustus Tulk, who had been a patron of Blake and a

close friend of Coleridge and who possessed one of the few copies of the plates of Blake's *Songs* which he had lent to Coleridge in 1818. Wilkinson's edition of the *Songs*, with his own introduction, was published in a very limited edition, of which Alexander Gilchrist remarked in his life of Blake published in 1863 that it 'soon became almost as scarce as the costly and beautiful original'. Gilchrist adds:

Dr Wilkinson printed them in an order of his own, and too often with words of his own; alterations which were by no means improvements always.^{iv}

In the early 1840s Garth spent much time translating some of Swedenborg's scientific works and in 1844 a new body, the Swedenborg Association, was formed for the specific purpose of printing and publishing these works. Financial assistance was given by the Revd Augustus Clissold, a wealthy Anglican clergyman who had been a curate of St Mary's, Stoke Newington and of St Martin-in-the-Fields and who, much later, was to be Chairman of the Swedenborg Society for a number of years. Garth's brother William Martin Wilkinson, a solicitor practising from an address in Lincoln's Inn Fields, also gave financial help. William Wilkinson became Secretary of the Swedenborg Society in 1842 and held that office until 1861 when he departed in the wake of the scandal involving the Society's manager, William White, whom William Wilkinson had supported in his advocacy of the sale of the works of the charismatic Thomas Lake Harris. Garth Wilkinson's translations of Swedenborg's scientific books soon attracted the attention of Ralph Waldo Emerson. In his essay 'Swedenborg, or the Mystic' in his *Representative Men* Emerson comments:

Swedenborg printed these scientific books in the ten years from 1734 to 1744, and they remained from that time neglected, and now, after their century is complete, he has at last found a pupil in Mr Wilkinson, in London, a philosophic critic with a coequal vigour of understanding and imagination comparable only to Lord Bacon's, who has produced his master's buried books to the day, and transferred them with every advantage from their forgotten Latin into English, to go round the world in our commercial and conquering tongue. This startling reappearance of Swedenborg after a hundred years in his pupil is not the least remarkable fact in his history....The admirable discourses with which Mr Wilkinson has enriched these volumes, throw all the contemporary philosophy of England into shade and leave me nothing to say on their proper grounds.^v

The books which Emerson referred to included the curiously titled works called respectively *The Economy of the Animal Kingdom* and *The Animal Kingdom*. These were not works of zoology, but concerned human anatomy and physiology, Swedenborg having embarked on a search for the seat of the soul (*anima*) through a study of the human body. A further volume of *The Animal Kingdom*, written by Swedenborg in about 1743 but not published in his lifetime, concerned the generative organs. The Latin text of this book was published in Tübingen and London in 1849 and an English translation by Wilkinson was published in 1852 with the title *The Generative Organs considered anatomically, physically, and philosophically*. While engaged on this translation he wrote to his friend Henry James senior:

I am bringing out, parallel with my work on the Body [that is Wilkinson's own book *The Human Body and its Relation to Man* published in 1851 which enjoyed wide currency at the time], a Translation of Swedenborg's work on the Generative organs

of both sexes: a book of singular suggestiveness, though not very compatible with the smugness and straightlacedness of many of the followers of Swedenborg. However, the Swedenborg Association has had the boldness to commission me to execute a version. I cannot help regarding it as one small step on the way to a greater liberty of thought on sexual subjects.^{vi}

While staying with this subject, it should be noted that in later years Wilkinson was a fierce opponent of the Contagious Diseases Acts of 1866 to 1869 passed to provide for the compulsory medical examination of prostitutes in garrison and naval dockyard towns in an attempt to prevent venereal disease. Measures of this kind were common on the Continent, but they were new to England and they aroused fierce opposition on a number of grounds. Wilkinson considered them an outrage to womanhood and he joined the campaign to repeal these statutes, writing more than one pamphlet on the subject and corresponding with Mrs Josephine Butler the foremost campaigner against this legislation. The Contagious Diseases Acts were finally repealed by Parliament in 1888.

More generally, he opposed the oppressive laws of his own day that kept women in an inferior position to men. In his book *Human Science and Divine Revelation* (1876), perhaps influenced by John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (published in 1869) he wrote:

Let male law be lifted off, as a burden and a shame, and woman be left to her proper self-determination; to be a much like a man, or as little like a man, as she pleases; to vote, propose marriage, administer property, and the like; and her quality will right itself, because her experimental instruction about her place can then begin.^{vii}

In the same book he rehearses the arguments against vivisection and eloquently and prophetically he condemns the hunting of animals purely for sport:

But destruction for the pleasure of it would not stand its ground. And especially the raid of travellers upon the great lives of the hippopotamus, the giraffe, the ostrich, the elephant, and other such creatures, would be forbidden, unless real reasons, and not wantonness, prompted it; forbidden as a brigandage of man upon the domains of nature;...^{viii}

Wilkinson's interest in the social theories of Charles Fourier (1772–1837) was noted by Emerson. The French social reformer advocated communities based on equality and co-operation rather than on competition. An attempt to put these theories into practice (with ultimately disastrous results) was attempted at Brook Farm in Massachusetts from 1841 to 1847. Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel *The Blithedale Romance* is a satire on a thinly disguised Brook Farm. It is not surprising that Wilkinson, with his links with Emerson and the Transcendentalists, should have shown a keen interest in this social experiment and the theories that begat it. Nearer home, it is of interest to note that Wilkinson took a keen interest in the 1848 Revolution in France and visited Paris that summer to see for himself what had happened. Here, in company with the veteran social reformer Robert Owen among others, he found himself trapped in the city during the violent workers' uprising known as the 'June Days' which was repressed with great ferocity by the Provisional Government. In a letter dated 25th June he wrote:

Here we are, much tired, but quite safe and well: we arrived at this place through sundry obstacles, but none really serious. It is a splendid city, but a day of horrors. Yesterday, by cannonading and musketry no less than 25,000 souls perished: nothing like it since the last Revolution, or since the Massacre of St Bartholomew. Two thousand men of the working class were butchered in the vaults of the Pantheon, which was ankle-deep in it. The Musketry has not ceased all night, and it is interrupted every now and then by heavy Artillery. But we are, I assure you, perfectly safe and I would not have missed the events for the world. They are historical. You can have no idea of them.^{ix}

If Garth Wilkinson is remembered at all today it is through his friendship with the elder Henry James and his family. James had been encouraged to read Swedenborg by Sophia Chichester whom he had met when staying at Ham Common near Richmond in 1843. His newfound enthusiasm for the Swedish seer soon brought him into contact with Wilkinson (of whose Fourierist interests he was already aware) and the two men became bosom friends. As James's biographer has put it:

Tall, dignified, learned, and tolerant, graceful to the point of airiness or even evasiveness and not at all preachy, Wilkinson nicely complemented James. The Englishman must have proved a comforting guide for a disturbed convert struggling to find his way. The two men had much in common domestically, both being in the fourth year of marriage and having small children.^x

The James's third son was named Garth Wilkinson James (known as Wilky in the family) after his father's friend, and Wilkinson's youngest daughter Mary James was named after his friend's wife. There are references (not always complimentary) to Wilkinson in the letters of the younger Henry James, but in old age Wilkinson was to pay a remarkable compliment to his oldest friend's distinguished son. In January 1895 the eighty-two year old Wilkinson had been to the St James's Theatre in King Street to see James's play *Guy Domville* which had had a famously disastrous reception on its first night. In a letter to its author Wilkinson criticised the character of James's protagonist as being 'touched to paralysis by the dogmatic torpors of celibacy, which he mistakes for cleanliness' and urged James to write a new play in which the superiority, both spiritual and natural, of marriage over celibacy would be shown. Henry James never achieved success as a playwright, but his later novels, particularly the great trilogy, *The Ambassadors*, *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Golden Bowl*, certainly deal with great understanding with the complications of sexual love between men and women.

In an obituary that was published in *The Daily News* Wilkinson was described as a man of the same cast of mind as that of the Swedish mystic he revered:

Phenomena, in their merely physical relations, seemed absolutely meaningless to him, and he moved amid ideas with a certainty that might have been envied by the most convinced materialist in his grasp of the ordinary facts of life. He was one of those born to believe. Personally he was a man of the sweetest and most winning nature and the gentlest disposition.^{xi}

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- ⁱ RW Emerson *English Traits* (1856), *The Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York, Tudor Publishing Company, no date), vol.2, p.176.
- ⁱⁱ Clement James Wilkinson, *James John Garth Wilkinson: A Memoir of his Life, with a Selection from his Letters* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., Ltd, 1911), p.249.
- ⁱⁱⁱ JJG Wilkinson, *War, Cholera and the Ministry of Health* (London: Robert Theobald, 1854), pp.68–69.
- ^{iv} Alexander Gilchrist, *The Life of William Blake* (London: Everyman's Library, 1982), p. 104.
- ^v RW Emerson, *Representative Men* (Cambridge MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1996), p.63.
- ^{vi} Letter to Henry James dated 2 August 1850 quoted in Wilkinson, *James John Garth Wilkinson*, pp.203–204.
- ^{vii} JJG Wilkinson, *Human Science and Divine Revelation* (London: James Speirs, 1876), pp.544–545.
- ^{viii} Wilkinson, *Human Science*, p.435.
- ^{ix} CJ Wilkinson, *JJG Wilkinson*, pp.59–60.
- ^x Alfred Habegger, *The Father: A Life of Henry James, Sr* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1994), p. 231.
- ^{xi} Quoted in CJ Wilkinson, *JJG Wilkinson*, pp. 299–300.